

## Writing *Centuries of Change*

The idea for this book was prompted by a newsreader at the end of December 1999. ‘As we draw to the end of the century that saw more change than any other...’ she began. I wondered about this statement, and over the following years had many, many conversations about ‘change’. People, it turned out, are fixated by the innovations of the twentieth century, and convinced that ‘change’ and technology are synonymous. The aeroplane, space travel, the atomic bomb, the mobile phone and the internet are all cited as reasons why the twentieth century really was ‘the century that saw more change than any other’.

For me, the question is not that simple. For a start, you can’t simply pick a big change and declare the century that contained it the winner. There’s no reason why flight is more important than, say, the Black Death. Also, it seemed to me that the lack of contenders from earlier centuries was not due to their insignificance so much as a widespread lack of awareness of their extent. Take someone from today and put him or her back in 1900: he or she will get along quite well. The clothes were not so very different (especially men’s), the language was almost identical, people understood that diseases were spread by germs, you could catch a train or use a bicycle, the food was abundant and would be familiar to a modern person, and society was basically stable and law-abiding. If you had any problems, you could have asked a policeman to help you. The same would not be true if you put that person back in 1800, and still less in 1700. And if you had taken someone from 1700 and put them back in 1600, they would have had one hell of a shock. Before that, any strange individual would have been simply pushed away and probably killed as an alien.

This always struck me as a signal test: would you be prepared to go there, if you could? In the modern world, people are primarily concerned by the safety of a foreign country; they don’t normally go to lawless places. Women especially can expect a tough time if they find themselves in a relatively violent, sexist community. So surely the centuries when we did most to impose law and order (twelfth, sixteenth and nineteenth) should be high contenders for the one that saw the most change? And think about money: the thirteenth century was the one that saw the widespread foundation of markets and the universal dependency on money. If you don’t think that’s a major change, try doing without money for a few years and see where it gets you.

These changes are subtle, and the subtleties of social history are rarely discussed in public. For all the statements about history being too much about battles and dates, most people prefer to think in terms of major events than slow, centuries-long developments. Consider how many more books there are on the French Revolution than there are on the rise of individualism. How many history books take into consideration the fact that you know what you look like whereas almost all of your medieval ancestors did not?

*Centuries of Change* is, like *The Time Traveller’s Guide to Medieval England*, the product of thirteen years’ thinking. It is an attempt to answer the ‘which century’ question in a systematic way. People fall into the trap of thinking that ‘change’ is a purely subjective matter, and that it is purely a parlour game. But it is far, far more important than that. We can measure aspects of standards of living, and we can prioritise certain needs over others (e.g. having enough food is more important than flying and mobile phones). Thus the question of change can be answered in regard to need – by assessing standards of living across the centuries in accordance with key criteria.

People keep asking me, 'So, which century is it?' I have to laugh. It is the *process* of determining the answer which is crucial: it is not the answer itself that matters so much as the way in which the answer is established, what changes with regard to our greatest needs have taken place, and how they have allowed society to become better fed, more secure, and so on. The answer by itself is like Douglas Adams's joke that '42' is the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything – what's important is to know the question or, rather, how the answer '42' was worked out.

In 2009 John and Anne Casson commissioned me to do a talk in the local parish church for a commemoration of the 1100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the diocese of Exeter. There was going to be quite an audience, including the then bishop of Plymouth, John Ford. I agreed on the condition that I could speak on the theme of 'which century saw the most change?' In preparing that talk I worked out the basic structure of *Centuries* and came to a conclusion about the end.

The night before the talk I was in the local pub with a friend, Richard, who had been born in North Cornwall but had lived in Devon for many years. I asked him if he was going to come to the church the following day to hear me speak. 'I don't need to go to the church to hear you blithering on,' he said, in a friendly way, 'I can hear that any time in here. Besides...'. At this point he pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket. 'Besides, I can phone up my brother now, on holiday in Australia, and you can't tell me that any century has seen more change than that.' To this I replied something along the following lines, 'Firstly, you are mistaking achievement for change. They are not synonymous. Secondly, a lot of history underlies that change. Australia was discovered by the West in the seventeenth century; it was settled in the late eighteenth. The telephone is a nineteenth-century invention, and so too is the telegraphic communication with Australia. The idea of a remote conversation with someone on the other side of the world is thus not a modern one. The only matters you've mentioned that count as significant changes after 1900 are the wireless character of the handset, and the fact your brother is on holiday on the other side of the world – something unthinkable before the twentieth century. But you and your brother were both born in Cornwall, and in 909 AD that was not even part of England. It had no coinage and most people lived in thatched, earthen-wall huts. Are your two changes – the wirelessness of your phone, and where your brother chooses to go on holiday – really comparable with the fact that you now are English, speak English, live in a brick-built house and have money in your pocket?'

Richard still didn't come to my talk. However, many other people did, and at the reception afterwards, as I passed between people with drinks in their hands, they were all still talking about the theme of change. And they continued to do so until the reception was finished. Overhearing their conversations, I decided that I had a duty to write a book on the subject.

I enjoyed writing *Centuries of Change* more than any of my other books. I have taken the arguments to heart, and they have informed me about so many aspects of development and politics, much of which I draw on when discussing new housing or sustainable energy in my role as a Secretary of State-appointed member of Dartmoor National Park Authority. Unlike most of my books, which are written for a relatively unchanging audience over the decades, this one is written for people here and now. It is the start of what I hope will be many debates. I just hope people understand the seriousness of the direction in which we are heading.

Ian Mortimer,

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